THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Sight Restored

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Reformation Sunday
John M. Buchanan

Suddenly, almost with a click, like a film coming into sync, everything has meaning, everything is real: and the meaning, the reality, shines out in every shape and sound and movement, in each and every manifestation of life, so that I want to cry out with the blind man to whom Jesus restored his sight: One thing I know, that whereas I was blind, now I see. How, I ask myself, could I have missed it before? How could I not have understood that the grey-silver light across the water, the cry of the sea gulls and the sweep of their wings, everything on which my eyes rest and my ears hear, is telling me about God?

Malcolm Muggeridge
Jesus: The Man Who Lives

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SIGHT RESTORED

"My teacher, let me see again."
Mark 10:51

"Be careful what you ask for … you might get it."

I'm not sure who said it, and if anyone here knows, I would be pleased to be enlightened. The Roman philosopher Seneca said something close to it. The great writer and teller of fables, Aesop, observed that "We would often be sorry if our wishes were gratified."

I'm not sure who said, "Be careful what you ask for – you might get it," but I learned the truth of it last Sunday evening at a banquet in Cambridge, Ohio, celebrating the 25th Anniversary of the Presbytery of Muskingum Valley. A friend of mine is the presbytery executive and he had invited me to be the speaker. Back in the spring when we were making the arrangements, the committee chair called our office to inquire what fee or honorarium I charged. That's always a difficult one for ministers because we don't ordinarily think in terms of fee for service. I never know what to say, so remembering that Muskingum Valley is a mostly rural presbytery in the farm country of Eastern Ohio, I told Judi to tell him that "two chickens, a dozen eggs, and some green beans" would be just fine.

Well, guess what. I got what I asked for. When I was introduced, the story was told and Jim pulled out a huge shopping bag with two whole chickens, a dozen eggs and a lovely jar – home canned, by the way – of green beans. He apologized – the crate containing the two live chickens he had purchased wouldn't fit in the trunk of his Honda.

Be careful what you ask for…

One time two friends of Jesus, his closest and dearest friends, said to him: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." His response was, "What is it that you want?" What they wanted, of course, was power and prestige, to sit at his right hand and left hand.

And the very next day, the way Mark tells the story of Jesus, it happened again, this time with a blind man. "What do you want?"

The way Mark presents the story of Jesus, the middle part is a walking journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. Galilee is home. Jerusalem is the capital city where the story will come to its climax and conclusion. In between is a journey during which his followers learn what it means to be his disciples. He's been patiently teaching, instructing. There is a crisis looming ahead. Conflict is mounting. Critics are questioning him, badgering him, arguing with him in every village. He knows it but they don't want to acknowledge it. His friend Peter argues with him about it – so vigorously that Jesus must rebuke him: "Get behind me Satan." And two of his dearest friends who ought to have been able to see what was transpiring as the opposition to him mounts and the criticism escalates, ought to have been able to see that the journey to Jerusalem will surely result in confrontation, conflict, arrest, perhaps death: ought to have been empathetic, sympathetic, or at

least have had the good sense to be quiet, instead of whining about power and prestige, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand, and one at your left, in your glory." It's as if they are blind.

And now Jericho, the last city on the way, with its famous walls, its busy bazaar, its infamous road up to Jerusalem. Jesus had used that road as the site of one of his most memorable stories about a man who fell among thieves and the Good Samaritan who stopped to help him. Jesus and his disciples leave the city, they encounter someone who, unlike James and John, is literally blind. Bartimaeus is his name and I love this man. He will not be put off ...will simply not be brushed aside this time. He's the first century equivalent of a *Street Wise* vendor ... like the one who used to work outside Neiman Marcus, with a voice like a howitzer. Bartimaeus is wonderful.

He's also miserable. He sits outside the walls, I suppose, because they won't let him in with offensively aggressive behavior. It's one thing to be blind and poor. It's another thing to be aggressive. The story doesn't say it, but I think there's an ordinance against aggressive begging in Jericho and rather than argue every day with the authorities, Bartimaeus shuffles outside the gate and just on the other side where you have literally to step over him he spreads out his cloak and sits down crosslegged, nearly naked, not a pretty sight for tourists coming and going and proceeds to beg aggressively. It was probably a pretty good spot, right outside the gates to Jerusalem. You can't buy *Street Wise* from every vendor. Some days you can't buy any. So you have to develop an avoidance technique ... the opposite side of the sidewalk or a polite, "no, thank you" or a determined focus straight ahead. The one I cannot ignore is my friend who sells *Street Wise* outside the grocery store and knows, I am sure, that in my sack is a six dollar Eli's Cheesecake I don't need, and knows as well that my Presbyterian conscience will make an instantaneous moral comparison between that cheesecake and his request and I will, to put it simply, be had and he will get my one dollar, or sometimes two.

That's Bartimaeus. And when he hears that it's Jesus of Nazareth, he turns up the volume and starts to shout. "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me," the translation of which is, "give me money." He's so loud and it's all so offensive that people tell him to be quiet. And that makes him yell even louder. "Son of David, mercy!"

And then, the first miracle in this story happens. Jesus hears him, stops and says, "Call him here." Bartimaeus throws off his cloak and, insofar as a blind man can spring, springs up and walks to Jesus and Jesus asks him, "What do you want ... What do you really want? I know you are asking for money. But what do you really want ..." the second time he has asked that question, remember. James and John want power, position, prestige. Bartimaeus could have said, one thousand dollars, a winning lottery ticket, a new house. But he knows what he wants. "My teacher, let me see again."

What a story! Let's hold it up and look at it carefully and see how it addresses us. Did you notice that the insiders are the blind ones. The blind outsider is given sight. Notice how Jesus says, "Your faith has made you well," and Bartimaeus falls in line and follows toward Jerusalem.

One of the things that intrigues me about this story is that Jesus attributes Bartimaeus's wholeness, his healing, to his faith. "Your faith has made you well." Trouble is, we don't know anything about Bartimaeus's faith. All we know is that he lives in Jericho, which means he's a Palestinian Jew, that he lost his sight somehow, that he got along in life by begging and that he was aggressive, bold, assertive, that he knew what he wanted and came directly to Jesus with his request. We really don't know anything about what we would ordinarily define as faith, or piety or religiousness. So maybe this story is offering a new and different definition of what it means to have faith.

You and I are inclined to define faith as believing. Faith is giving intellectual assent to ideas about God and Jesus. Faith is believing that Jesus is Lord and Savior. Faith is saying yes to theological assertions, affirming creeds. Could it be that Jesus is calling faith something very different? Could it be that the blind man's persistence, his bold action, his coming directly to Jesus with his request, his need, his pain, that all of that is what faith is?

I think so. I have known a lot of people who seem interested in church and Christianity in the abstract, but can't and won't make a commitment because they aren't sure what they believe in an intellectual sense. I think faith has far more to do with active following than agreeing with intellectual assertions. I think an imperfect relationship with Jesus, a less than complete personal theology or belief system, is not at all an impediment to faith. Faith is acting, asking, coming directly to Jesus, and then following. Jesus didn't ask people to believe ideas about him. He asked people to get up and follow, to become new people, to start giving their lives away … almost as if the belief part will come along later.

And notice, if Bartimeaus has faith it must have something to do with bringing the difficult material, the real pain and tragedy, bringing to full voice, the conflict, the doubts, the questions.

I received a poignant letter from a friend last week, a high school basketball coach who is one of the most committed, dedicated individuals I've ever met. He was writing about his younger brother, a devoted husband and father of two young children, whose wife's cancer has returned, this time in a very aggressive form. The prognosis is not at all good. He was asking me for advice about what to say to his brother in his pain and anger. My friend Jack had asked his brother how he could help. His brother, who is a man of faith, stunned him by saying, "Get me a meeting with God. I think I'll take a swing at him." That's not irreverence … that's deep and profound faith. That's bringing to God the deepest, most searing pain in life. That's a lot like Job, pounding on the door of heaven, demanding that God be accountable. It's like the Psalmist complaining, "How long, O Lord, how long?" It's like Jesus on the cross demanding, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Wholeness and healing do not happen until brokenness is acknowledged and pain expressed. We know the truth of that in our personal relationships and it is true of our most profound relationship with our God.

This is a story, first of all, of a man of faith.

It is also a story of a man who knew what he wanted and was clear about it, was undeterred in his search for it.

Peter Gomes, the preacher to the university at Harvard, in his recent book, *The Good Book*, has a fascinating section on the Good Life. It is Gomes' experience that when you ask university students what they really want in life, the first answer sounds an awful lot like "money and lots of it." Sometimes they say "security" or "freedom to do what I want." And sometimes they say it directly. One undergraduate put it simply, "I'm not greedy. I just want as much as I can get."

But, Gomes observes, immediately underneath the surface, students are searching for something more, something more profound. It's why they, Generation X and the Baby Boomers immediately ahead of them, are called the Seekers. And their seeking for something of lasting meaning and values often brings them in conflict with the prevailing values of our culture, and sometimes into conflict with their own parents.

Gomes tells about speaking at the graduation ceremony at a posh Manhattan girls' school. He chose for his text Matthew 6, "Is not life more than food and clothing and the body? Consider the lilies...therefore be not anxious." The girls liked it but afterward an irate father let him know in no uncertain terms what he thought. "Nonsense!" he said. "It was anxiety that got my daughter into this school, it was anxiety that kept her here, it was anxiety that got her into Yale, it will be anxiety that will keep her there and it will be anxiety that will get her a good job. You are selling nonsense." [p. 179]

Gomes muses that the father is not only wrong but headed for disaster. Sooner or later, his definition of the good life and how to get it turns sour. He writes, "I think we have reached the point where so many thousands of able, disappointed and questioning young people are prepared to exchange the good life for the life that is good." [p. 180]

And so, a whole generation of young people are called seekers, not unlike that brave blind man who knew what was missing in his life and took his request directly to Jesus. Gomes thinks it is the most remarkable phenomenon of our age, "this palpable search for the good, for goodness, for God. "Some," he says, "will call it a revival." He prefers to call it a pilgrimage ... "this is not a backward, sentimental, nostalgic retreat into the religious certainties of an earlier age ... this is truly counter culture, new, and full of adventure." [p. 181]

It is a story of a man who knows what he really wants and needs. And it is a story of a man who was blind and wanted to see. I saw the Renoir exhibit last week and I wondered, as I always do when I look at the impressionists and the post-impressionists who painted such beauty – I wondered about what they saw when they painted: what Renoir saw when he observed the Boating Party, the men and women whose portraits he painted, the gorgeous children. I don't know if it's true, but someone told me that Van Gogh's glorious "Starry Night," with all those bright swirls, is actually an accurate representation of what Van Gogh saw when he looked into a night sky because of astigmatism. I prefer to think that when he looked at stars, or sunflowers, or when Renoir looked at people, or Monet – water lilies, or O'Keefe – iris – the artist sees more, sees something of the essence, the truth of the object and that the gift of the art to the rest of us is

their sharing of the truth and beauty you and I are inclined not to see when we look at the same object because we are busy, in a hurry, blind.

What a gift to be able to see … what a miracle to see the glorious reality of life that presents itself to us every day: the sunrise, the flowers, the face of our beloved, the smile of a friend. And what a miracle to see that deeper reality in every ordinary object. "Behold! Look! See!" the Bible commands over and over again. See the God-given reality in front of your eyes. See the gifts you are given.

The late Malcolm Muggeridge, British intellectual, gadfly, editor of *Punch* magazine, with opinions on everything – most of them critical, was sent by the BBC to Calcutta to interview Mother Teresa. He was swept off his feet. Her simplicity, service and joy helped Muggeridge discover what was missing in his own life and what his own deepest needs were.

> "How could I have missed it? How not have understood that the grey-silver light across the water, the cry of the seagulls and the sweep of their wings, everything on which my eyes rest and my ears hear, is telling me about God." [*Jesus, The Man Who Lives,* p. 25]

When the man's sight is restored, what he sees is Jesus and then, he gets up and follows.

I suppose we do come here for a variety of reasons: to meet our friends; to hear good music; to get in out of the wind. But I've always suspected that chief among them is just this: we want to see better and differently. We're looking for something and even though we may not know exactly what it is, its absence is so real, our need and longing is so real, that we sit here, like that blind man, hoping that someone will come along, or something will happen to fulfill our need and restore our sight.

You know, the blind man didn't have all the answers figured out before he called out to Jesus. All he knew was that he couldn't see. And there was something in that acknowledgment, something in his aggressive, persistent pursuit, that resulted in his restoration, his wholeness. So you and I don't have to know exactly who he is before we bring our need. All we have to do is acknowledge the need and bring it to him and then open our eyes.

The very best part about this story is that Jesus hears and sees and pays attention to the blind man. Even though the crowd tries to hush him up and hurry Jesus quickly by, a miracle happens, a miracle even more astonishing than the restoration of sight. Jesus hears and sees and attends.

This is Reformation Sunday, a day, someone said, when Protestants used to gather to give God thanks that they weren't Catholics.

Fortunately, all of that is past and Reformation Sunday has become a day to remember and celebrate the miracle of grace which we share with all Christians. The Reformation recovered the basic Christian notion that our spiritual welfare, our wholeness, our salvation, does not depend on us alone, that there is one who comes after us, who hears our cries, knows our needs, who loves

us and accepts us just as we are, and whose pursuit of us is every bit as real and palpable as our needs, our seeking, our asking.

Reformation Sunday is a time to remember that the grace of God in Jesus Christ meets us at the time and place where we know our need, our brokenness, our blindness, and simply bring all of it to God.

There's promise in that, for you and me. It may not be dramatic. It probably will not be. It may not be public. It may be quiet and very private, but the promise is that when we ask, he responds. And when we act boldly and follow him, we become whole.

It's amazing, actually. It's amazing grace.

> I once was lost
> But now am found
> Was blind, but now I see.

Amen.